

University of Nebraska - Lincoln

**DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln**

---

The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012

China Beat Archive

---

6-4-2009

# China's Growing Cage: The Legacy of Tiananmen

Zhang Lijia

Follow this and additional works at: <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive>



Part of the [Asian History Commons](#), [Asian Studies Commons](#), [Chinese Studies Commons](#), and the [International Relations Commons](#)

---

Lijia, Zhang, "China's Growing Cage: The Legacy of Tiananmen" (2009). *The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012*. 470.  
<http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/chinabeatarchive/470>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the China Beat Archive at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in The China Beat Blog Archive 2008-2012 by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

# China's Growing Cage: The Legacy of Tiananmen

---

June 4, 2009 in [Zhang Lijia](#) by [The China Beat](#) | [No comments](#)

*A much shorter version of this piece [originally appeared](#) in the New York Times, part of a series there on "[Tiananmen Square, 20 Years Later](#)," which also features pieces by Ha Jin, Yu Hua and others.*  
By Zhang Lijia

Whenever "1989" is mentioned, people in the West instantly think about the protesting students in Tiananmen Square. In fact, although it started in Beijing and was led by the students there, the democratic movement was a nationwide event, drawing together people from all walks of life.

Twenty years on, I remember vividly every detail of that day when I organized a demonstration among the workers from my Nanjing factory in support of the movement. It was Sunday, May 28, a week before the crackdown in Beijing.

The death of Hu Yaobang had triggered the spontaneous democratic movement. The popular former Communist Party secretary-general had been ousted, in part for his sympathetic view towards students' protests. When the government rejected their request for his rehabilitation, Beijing students marched towards Tiananmen, demanding greater freedom and democracy. Like a match thrown onto kindling, students from all over the country took to the streets. They were soon joined by ordinary citizens who were disgusted by widespread corruption, rising inflation, and lack of personal freedom.

By then I had been working for a factory, a missile producer, for nine years in Nanjing, my hometown. The factory was a mini-Communist state, housing us in identical block buildings, feeding us at dining halls, indoctrinating us at meeting rooms and controlling our lives with strict rules: no lipsticks; no high heel shoes or flared trousers; no dating for the first three years at the factory. Every month, all women had to go to the hygiene room to show blood to the so-called 'period police' to prove that we were not pregnant.

To escape, I decided to teach myself English in the hope of getting a job as an interpreter outside the factory with one of the foreign companies. What I learnt, of course, wasn't just the ABCs but the whole cultural package. I dared to be different: wearing short skirts and having boyfriends. After I mastered enough English I became obsessed with listening to the BBC, which broadcast news very different from our propaganda. I attended politically-charged lectures at Nanjing University, debating if Western-style democracy was the answer for China.

On that Sunday in May, after watching televised images of workers in Guangzhou marching in the rain, I decided to organize a protest. I telephoned all my friends at the factory, and some of them informed their friends. We got the banners and placards ready in just a few hours.

Under the wary eyes of our factory leaders, about 300 of us set off, as if for battle, defending a noble cause. Walking at the very front, I held a red flag and felt a sense of liberation that I had never experienced before. Behind me two workers carried a cloth banner that read, "Here come the workers!" The little strips of bright red cloth tied to our arms and heads flamed in the wind.

We marched toward the Drum Tower, Nanjing's version of Tiananmen. On the main street, our group melted into a flow of marchers. Before us walked students from a technical school; at our tail were several dozen workers from a glass-making factory. We chanted slogans like "Long live democracy!" "Down with the repressive government!" "Anyone who dares to crack down on the democracy movement will be condemned for 10,000 years!" Onlookers cheered us on. Along the way, hundreds more workers from our factory joined in, which made ours the largest demonstrations among workers in Nanjing during the movement.

During that time, my ear was glued to my shortwave radio, and I learned about the crackdown at Tiananmen from foreign broadcasts. The following year, I left for England, feeling defeated and pessimistic about my country's future. In 1993, when I returned, I was surprised by China's booming economy. Many commentators had predicted that the authoritarian regime would have collapsed, especially after the massacre. It lacked political legitimacy and had an over-centralized power structure.

Over the past twenty years, apart from short spells living abroad, I have been more or less based in Beijing. I've witnessed and reported, as a freelance journalist and writer, China's remarkable transformation: the economy has charged ahead like a steed without a reign; foreign trade and investment have expanded greatly; and China, with its successful foreign policy, has become a more important player on the world stage.

One might argue that China still has no real democracy or it has not made fundamental improvements in civil or political rights. Many topics are off-limits, such as the Communist Party's monopoly on power. Of course, discussion of 'June 4 Movement' remains a taboo. But that doesn't mean the Party has not learnt some lessons from those events two decades past.

Over the years, amid overwhelming economic and social changes, it has navigated its way forward, proving to be more flexible and adaptive than ever before and very resilient. The leaders make it clear to citizens that it is futile to pursue political reforms. Political debates that once buzzed at university campus in the 80s and excited me and my fellow idealistic youth are nowhere to be found.

The country's paternalistic rulers consciously channel people's energy into making money. The Chinese people have indeed embraced the consumer culture whole-heartedly.

The authority has been crushing hard on potential threats: Falungong was outlawed and dissidents were thrown in jail. On the other hand, it has loosened certain controls and granted people more personal freedom. We can now choose our own life styles. Lipsticks, high heel shoes, the width of trousers, and one's period, dating and sex life all fall into a place called 'privacy' which didn't really exist before.

These improvements shouldn't be lightly dismissed. Personal freedoms and the emergence of an urban middle class can potentially lead to democratic processes, as seen in other Asian countries.

However, China seems to be different. The urban professionals and the business people have been absorbed by the Party as a new "elite" class. The entrepreneurs are welcomed into the realm of politics, and Party members have flowed to the private sectors. The mixture of power and business makes it hard to distinguish private from state-owned in today's hybrid economy.

Back in 1989, the educated urban elites enthusiastically took part in the democratic movement not only because they felt that economic change required political relaxation but also because they were bitter about their low salaries, their poor living conditions and lack of opportunities while the children of the high-ranking leaders made easy and vast profits. In a TV interview, when asked what they wanted, Wu'er Kaixi, one of the leading students leaders at the Tiananmen replied, somehow flippantly: "Nike shoes. Lots of free time to take our girlfriends to a bar. The freedom to discuss an issue with someone."

And it is not just Nike shoes or other designer goods that Chinese have gained. Many urban professionals are now proud owners of cars as well as their own homes. They find themselves the beneficiaries of the government's strategic generosity policy, enjoying higher salary and other perks. Academics now can travel abroad freely. And most choose to return after their study abroad.

My sworn sister, who works for Nanjing government, has an enviable lifestyle, living in a flat she bought at a knock-down price, enjoying medical care and being driven around everywhere. She was sympathetic to us protesters back in 1989. But why would she want to protest against the government now?

Ever since the "May 4 Movement" in 1919, intellectuals and students have always been the frontrunners of mass demonstrations. In recent years, public protests have occurred all over the country like mushrooms after a spring rain, mostly by victims of land seizure or laid-off workers. With the economic downturn, 2009 will probably see more protests. But without the participants of intellectuals, such outbursts of discontentment are unlikely to grow into a national movement or cause large scale social turmoil. The urban elites are too content with their lives to upset anything, though they'd describe themselves as liberal and pro-democracy if asked.

As for today's university students, they grew up in an affluent society. China's growing wealth and rising position in the world have made them assertive and nationalistic. The outburst of nationalism in the wake of 'Tibetan Unrest' last March was just an example. At least for the time being, if the students go out to demonstrate, it will more likely be against some foreign power rather than its own government.

There's still a cage in China. But for many, my fellow marchers from Nanjing included, the cage has grown so big that they can't feel its limitations. The movement in 1989 didn't reach its final goal – to bring democracy to China. But I wouldn't describe it as a total failure. Without the effort by the hot-blooded students and all those who participated, the rulers might not have expanded the cage.

*Lijia Zhang is a Beijing-based writer and the author of "Socialism is Great!" A Worker's Memoir of the New China, which [came out in May in paperback](#).*

**Tags:** 1989, 6/4, Tiananmen, Zhang Lijia